

Executive Summary

The 229 Legacy Places presented in this report range in size, the level of protection that has already been initiated, the amount that potentially remains to be completed, and their relative conservation and recreation significance. Collectively, they are the special places that “make Wisconsin Wisconsin.”

The purpose of this *Wisconsin Land Legacy Report* is to identify the places believed to be most important to meet the state’s conservation and recreation needs over the next fifty years. The report is divided into three parts. Part I provides the background context for the report and describes some of the ecological, social, and economic characteristics of our current and past landscape. Part II, which forms the bulk of the report, describes the 229 Legacy Places and is arranged by the sixteen ecological landscapes* in the state. In addition to these specific places, several resources and needs that occur over wide portions of the state are also described in Part II. Part III offers some visions of how the report might be implemented.

The places described in this report were identified in a two-step process. First, criteria were developed—based on input generated from a series of public and staff meetings held around the state—for determining what types and characteristics of land and water are believed to be most important in conserving critical natural resources and providing outdoor recreation opportunities. Then, with the use of existing data on Wisconsin’s natural resources, Department staff expertise, and input from the public, the criteria were applied. The resulting 229 Legacy Places presented in this report range in size, the level of protection that has already been initiated and the amount that potentially remains to be completed, and their relative conservation and recreation significance. Collectively, they are the special places that “make Wisconsin Wisconsin.”

The Legacy Places are arranged in this report by “ecological landscapes”—regions of the state that are distinct based on their topography, soils, aquatic features, current and past vegetation, and other factors. A brief description highlighting some key characteristics is provided for each Legacy Place as are subjective assessments of their size, the level of protection that has been initiated and the amount that potentially remains to be completed, and their relative conservation and recreation significance.

The Legacy Places are represented on maps depicting existing public conservation lands and the current “land cover” (e.g., forest, grassland, urban, agriculture, etc.). The locations of the Legacy Places are represented only generally—as dots—because specifically identifying which lands and waters associated with the Legacy Places are most appropriate to maintain and protect is best left to a locally-focused planning process. *Determining where protection efforts should be focused, which protection strategies would be most effective, and who might be involved will require a more detailed evaluation involving local landowners, citizens, organizations, businesses, and governments.*

To be sure, we have a solid foundation of protected land in the state. Many of Wisconsin’s natural resource gems are publicly owned. The Apostle Islands, Chiwaukee Prairie, the Lower Wisconsin River, the Dells of the Eau Claire, Devil’s Lake, Whitefish Dunes and the Brule River are among the most scenic, most



Blackhawk Island in the Wisconsin River

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visited, and most ecologically valuable places in the Midwest. In addition to these treasures, other federal, state, county, and local properties support a mosaic of high quality grasslands, forests, wetlands, and waterbodies throughout the state. Wisconsin’s public land base also provides places for people to hike, watch birds, canoe, ride horses, snowmobile, fish, and hunt, among many other outdoor recreation activities.

Wisconsin also has many private conservation and recreation groups that maintain a network of important places throughout the state. From the Ridges Sanctuary in Door County to the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology’s Honey Creek Natural Area in the Baraboo Hills to The Nature Conservancy’s Lulu Lake Preserve, these and many other places are indicative of the success that a team of dedicated volunteers can have in sustaining our natural heritage.

Finally, and most importantly, are the every day actions taken by countless private land-owners who are motivated by a land ethic with roots back to Aldo Leopold. Their properties, although not protected in a formal sense, make enormous contributions towards meeting the state’s conservation and recreation needs.

Although an excellent foundation from which to work, gaps remain in Wisconsin’s “portfolio” of protected lands and waters. The science of conservation has evolved over the past several decades and as a result we better understand how our forests, wetlands, and grasslands function. It is now apparent that in many cases our protected places are likely too

small, isolated, and fragmented to maintain their species diversity and their ecological functions over time. As a state, we will need to continue finding ways to better integrate our conservation lands within larger working agricultural and forested landscapes. And given the distribution of our protected places, it is clear that many of our southern habitats remain at risk.

Demand for outdoor recreation continues to exceed supply. Wisconsinites like to get outdoors to relax, socialize, and recover from the stresses of daily life with uncommon zeal. As our population continues to urbanize, more and more people depend on public lands to provide a wide variety of recreation opportunities. This increasing pressure on public lands has led to a growing number of conflicts and overcrowding, as well as impacts to resources. The uneven distribution of lands available for public outdoor recreation across the state is a long-standing concern for the Department and others.

This report is not intended to identify **how** or **when** these Legacy Places should be protected or **who** might take the lead in implementing protection measures. Many partners and stakeholders would need to be directly involved in evaluating protection options and opportunities for these places. Protection strategies would need to be customized to fit local requirements and opportunities and is a level of work well beyond the scope of this report.



Hiking on the Ice Age Trail

The state’s future conservation and recreation needs can never be completely anticipated. Our landscape will change significantly over the next fifty years. Our recreation demands will evolve. So will our understanding of ecological systems and how best to protect and maintain them. In the future, some of the places presented in this report may not be able to meet the objectives for which they were originally identified. In other cases, places whose value we do not recognize now may emerge as being essential to meet future conservation or recreation needs. As such, this report is intended to be dynamic and will need to be periodically reviewed and updated.

*Highlighted words are defined in the Glossary.